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Marketing Strategy Implementation: Why is it So Hard?

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Marketing Strategy Implementation: Why is it So Hard?

Abstract

The successful implementation of planned marketing strategy is widely held to be an important driver of firm performance. For managers, however, implementing marketing strategy is a time-consuming, problem-ridden process, with frequent failures. Yet, despite past research attention we still have little understanding of why this continues to be the case. This study synthesizes insights from fieldwork interviews, the marketing and strategic management literature, and focus groups with managers to enhance understanding of why implementing marketing strategy is so hard. In delineating important components of marketing strategy implementation, mapping the strategy implementation process, and identifying new causes of common problems inherent in the resulting understanding of the marketing strategy implementation phenomenon, our study offers an explanation for frequently observed gaps between "intended" and "realized" marketing strategy. Strategy implementation is revealed as a complex phenomenon that involves inherent trade-offs between different aspects and stages of implementation, making "silver bullet" solutions to commonly observed marketing strategy implementation problems unlikely. This offers a rich foundation for a new generation of marketing strategy implementation research. We also offer some guidance—with associated downside trade-offs highlighted—for managers to consider in efforts to enhance marketing strategy implementation effectiveness.

Keywords

Marketing strategy formulation; Marketing strategy implementation; Marketing execution; Marketing strategy decisions; Strategy implementation process; Strategy implementation failure

Marketing Strategy Implementation: Why is it So Hard?

1. Introduction

A fundamental premise in marketing theory is that through the formulation and implementation of specific patterns of resource deployments designed to achieve marketing objectives in a target market, marketing strategy drives firm performance (e.g., Morgan et al. 2019; Varadarajan 2010). From this perspective, marketing strategy formulation involves making explicit "what" decisions regarding goal setting, target market selection, desired positioning, and timing (e.g., Morgan 2012; Slater and Olson 2001). Conversely, marketing strategy implementation concerns "how" these marketing strategy decisions (MSDs) are enacted through subsequent actions and resource deployments (e.g., Dobni 2003; Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies 2012; Olson, Slater, and Hult 2005). Theory therefore posits that over time high performing firms are distinguished not only by well-conceived marketing strategies but also by their success in implementing them (e.g., Menon et al. 1999; Morgan 2012; Thorpe and Morgan 2007).

However, despite almost universal recognition of the importance of successful implementation of planned marketing strategy, it is widely viewed as a problematic managerial task—consuming substantial time and effort resources, and often ending in failure (e.g., Malshe et al. 2022; Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies 2012; Noble and Mokwa 1999). While estimates vary, consulting firm surveys have consistently reported strategy implementation failure rates of greater than 60% and up to 90% (e.g., Gartner 2022; Kaplan and Norton 2005; PMI 2013). Such implementation failures can be very costly in terms of the resources wasted and benefits foregone (Colgate and Dannaher 2000; Gerstner 2002; Powell 2004). For example, despite having strategies to defend their existing product market positions and exploit relevant new innovations, Kodak, Blockbuster, and Nokia all failed to successfully execute these strategies

and each lost billions of dollars in shareholder value. Similarly, Weight Watchers rebranding and other marketing strategies in the past decade have all failed to be executed in ways that delivered expected results, reducing its market capitalization from more than $5b to less than $100m.

Given the theoretical and managerial importance of strategy implementation, it has received relatively little direct attention in the literature over the past twenty-five years as researchers have paid more attention to related phenomenon such as flexibility, agility, and adherence (Amoo et al. 2019; Oliveira, Carneiro, and Esteves 2019). However, researchers have identified a small number of top management, cross-functional, and individual-level commitment factors that may either help or hinder managers' efforts to implement marketing strategies (see Table 1). Yet, despite the widespread dissemination of this knowledge—and its relatively intuitive logic—the literature and business press indicate that marketing strategy implementation nonetheless continues to be a problematic managerial task (e.g., MacLennan and Markides 2021; Schuler et al. 2023; Spyropoulou et al. 2018). Further, while precise and consistent measures are unavailable (Cândido and Santos 2015), indicators of the incidence of implementation failures in practice have remained consistently high over time. For example, Copernicus (2001) reported that weak implementation of marketing strategy was three times more common than strong. In 2004/5 Ernst & Young estimated that 66% of strategies were not implemented as intended, Raps (2005) estimated only 10-30% of intended strategies succeed, and Mankins and Steel (2005) reported that companies only realize 63% of the financial performance promised by their strategies. In 2008, Neilson, Martin, and Powers reported that 60% of organizations rate themselves as being ineffective at executing strategic decisions. By 2013 61% of firms reported frequently being unable to bridge the gap between strategy formulation and execution (Economist 2013) and BCG were reporting that 81% of shareholder value loss was attributable to

strategy implementation failure (Minardi 2016). Most recently, McKinsey (2021) reported that less than one third of strategy executions are viewed as successful—and that this proportion has not changed in their research over the past 15 years, while Gartner report essentially the same numbers (2022). Thus, consulting survey evidence suggests most planned strategies fail to be effectively implemented and that the incidence of such failures is not diminishing over time.

[Insert Table 1 here]

In an effort to provide new insights into the underlying causes of frequently observed marketing strategy implementation problems, we focus on enhancing understanding of the phenomenon itself as a potential source. Specifically, we synthesize insights from fieldwork interviews, extant literature, and focus groups with managers, to uncover important trade-offs that are inherent in the process of implementing marketing strategies. As a necessary first step, we introduce a new conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation and then elaborate a new model of the implementation process. Our model deepens understanding of this important but elusive marketing phenomenon and provides a new foundation for future research. To direct such future empirical research efforts, we outline a new research agenda.

2. Research Approach

The nature of the research problem requires a balance between a "coarse-grained" approach to capture the wide-ranging domain of marketing strategy implementation, and a "fine-grained" approach to identify important variables and relationships that provide a basis for future empirical research and allow more specific insights. To bridge these conflicting requirements we adopt a discovery-oriented approach (e.g., Menon et al. 1999; Zeithaml et al. 2020) synthesizing literature and field-based insights to build a conceptual model identifying variables and relationships key to understanding marketing strategy implementation. Our level of analysis is

the SBU—any unit that has responsibility for competitive strategy, resource deployment, and performance outcomes for a definable product-market space (e.g., Morgan et al. 2012; Sudharshan 1995). Most marketing strategies are executed at the SBU-level and it is the most managerially relevant unit of analysis as it offers the greatest potential for linking marketing strategy implementation with performance (e.g., Spyropoulou et al. 2018; Varadarajan and Clark 1994). Our study was conducted using a multi-stage approach depicted in Figure 1.

The first stage in our study involved a cross-disciplinary review of the relevant available literature (see Tables 1 and 2). This review served to delineate the extent of existing implementation knowledge and to identify elements believed to be important components and outcomes of implementation.[1] These literature-based insights were then synthesized to build an initial outline of the conceptual domain of marketing strategy implementation. This outline conceptualization was used to develop an open-ended discussion guide protocol with questions designed to: tap managers understanding of the meaning, domain, and process of marketing strategy implementation; identify perceived drivers of implementation problems; and delineate managers understanding of the marketing strategy implementation-performance linkage.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Next, we used the discussion guide to structure qualitative in-depth interviews, conducted with marketing managers and consultants. We used a purposive sampling plan to ensure the representation of different businesses. Of the 48 individuals interviewed, 40 were marketing or business managers and 8 were marketing strategy consultants. The managers represented a broad array of organizations including those with: consumer and business customers; product-based and service-based value offerings; durable and consumable products; high and low technology

[1] For a deeper coverage of the generic strategy implementation literature see recent work in strategy literature captured in Table 2 (e.g., Knight, Daymond, and Sotirios, 2020; MacLennan and Markides 2021; Prange 2021).

businesses; small and large firms; and corporations based in the US, Europe, and Asia. Our sample included specialist marketing strategy consultants as their exposure to many marketing strategy implementation episodes provides unique knowledge bases with experience and insight spanning multiple industries, different strategies, and varying firm and market contexts.

To gain rich insights and deeper understanding, 24 of the managers interviewed were drawn from 5 separate companies. In each firm we conducted multiple interviews by asking managers to focus on one recent marketing strategy implementation episode. *AutoCo* is a multinational car manufacturer where we focused on the firm's marketing strategy decision to switch from a traditional market share goal to a new profit focus that was implemented by "re-engineering" its marketing organization and marketing processes. *SoftCo* is a small educational software developer where we examined its marketing strategy designed to significantly alter its target market and desired positioning by re-defining its product mix and changing its major sales channel. *LubeCo* is a multinational lubricants business where we focused on its strategy to change its desired positioning to that of an "added-value" supplier that was executed by adding a technology-based service enhancement for its sales force and customers. *CellCo* is a small, entrepreneurial, mobile technology start-up where we focused on its marketing strategy to seek a pioneering advantage in two niche industrial markets and position itself as a high value-add mobile solutions provider. The strategy was executed by developing and launching a new handheld product with accompanying software and application services in these markets. Finally, *LawCo* is a large legal services firm where we examined its marketing strategy to target a new consumer segment that was implemented by launching a new direct channel legal service.

Preliminary conceptual frameworks were developed from the synthesis of the initial literature review and the field-based insights generated in the interviews. We then conducted a

second, more focused literature review centered on the emerging conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation and its outcomes as well as emerging factors important in understanding marketing strategy implementation problems (See Table 3). Here the task was to seek additional support (or non-support) for the initial conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation and emerging insights into the causes of marketing strategy implementation problems.

[Insert Table 3 here]

These additional insights from the literature were used to refine the preliminary conceptual model of marketing strategy implementation. The conceptual model was then used as the focus of discussions with five academic researchers (all of whom have studied various aspects of implementation). The interviews with researchers were designed to elicit insights that might not emerge from the extant literature and interviews with practitioners. The insights resulting from our interviews with academics were synthesized with our previous work into a revised conceptual model detailing the conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation.

We next took our conceptual model and used it to structure discussions in three focus group-type workshops. Participants were students in executive MBA programs with significant marketing strategy experience and represented a wide range of industries and firms. The focus groups were conducted at two US and one European business school. This stage of the research is a form of "triangulation" used to assess the face validity of our conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation and the resulting insights regarding marketing strategy implementation problems. These final field-based insights were integrated with our earlier findings to develop our final conceptual model. At this stage we sought to achieve a balance between theoretical rigor, domain coverage, model parsimony, and managerial relevance. Using a mix of inductive and deductive approaches throughout our study is consistent with the need to gain deeper

conceptual understanding in relatively undeveloped areas of inquiry (Zeithaml et al. 2020).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

3. Defining Marketing Strategy Implementation

Marketing strategy concerns the formulation and implementation of specific patterns of resource deployments designed to achieve marketing objectives in a target market (e.g., Morgan et al. 2019; Varadarajan 2010). The literature offers a rich and detailed picture of marketing strategy formulation in terms of the process and content of making marketing strategy decisions regarding: *goal setting*—the identification and selection of marketing strategy goal criteria (e.g., market share, profit margin, etc.) and desired levels of performance; *market selection*—choices of the product-marketplaces and segments within which marketing strategy goals are to be achieved; *positioning*—deciding how the firm's value offering(s) need to be viewed in the target market(s) to achieve strategic goals; and *timing*—the desired order and speed of entry and exit in target segments and marketplaces and/or timeline for strategy implementation (e.g., Slater and Olson 2001; Varadarajan 2010). Conversely, the literature on marketing strategy implementation is much more limited, indicating only in general terms that marketing strategy implementation is concerned with the translation of MSDs into resource deployments (e.g., Cespedes 1991; Rosier, Morgan, and Cadogan 2010). Given the relatively scant direct attention to implementation in the extant literature, a necessary first step in understanding why implementing marketing strategy is so hard is the comprehensive delineation of the domain of marketing strategy implementation.

Our fieldwork, with some support in the marketing literature, suggests that marketing strategy implementation concerns both *content* issues in terms of "tactical" marketing mix choices, and *process* issues in terms of resource deployments to enact MSDs (e.g., Bonoma 1985; Cespedes 1991; Morgan et al. 2019). Additionally, the innovation and technology

literatures have distinguished between the level of adoption of an innovation/technology, and its impact once in place, as important sub-domains of implementation (e.g., Klein and Sorra 1996; Tyre and Hauptman 1992). In a similar vein, management researchers posit that implementation concerns not only the completeness of adoption of intended strategy over time, but also the value of realized outcomes and the time taken in achieving them (e.g., Miller 1997; Nutt 1996).

Considering goal achievement and timing as aspects of implementation—rather than simply outcomes of it—may appear counter-intuitive. However, this broader view from the technology and management literature is consistent with our fieldwork which indicates that marketing strategy implementation begins once initial MSDs are taken and ends when subsequent goal attainment outcomes—whatever they may be—are realized and assessed. In addition, evaluating early marketplace responses to initial execution efforts and their associated outcomes to allow necessary adjustments to future implementation efforts is clearly seen as a key element in several treatments of strategy implementation in the marketing literature (e.g., Moorman and Miner 1998; Morgan 2012). Integrating insights from our fieldwork with the literature therefore suggests that marketing strategy implementation should be conceptualized as comprising: the design of the marketing program to realize planned MSD's; the deployment of resources to enact the desired marketing program; goal achievement relative to planned objectives; and the time taken in achieving realized goal accomplishment. We delineate each of these sub-domains of marketing strategy implementation in turn below.

Marketing Program Design. This concerns the integrated set of planned specific marketing actions intended to deliver an intended marketing strategy in ways that will achieve its goals. Once MSDs concerning goals, market selection, desired positioning, and timing have been taken, the first stage in enactment concerns their translation into more specific and detailed

action-oriented tactics covering the relevant aspects of the marketing mix (Bonoma 1985; Cespedes 1991). Our fieldwork indicates that two aspects of marketing program design are particularly important in marketing strategy implementation. First, alignment—the degree to which marketing program designs exhibit congruency within individual marketing mix elements, complementarity between marketing mix elements, and fit between the entire marketing program design and the planned set of MSDs (e.g., Porter 1996; Vorhies and Morgan 2003). The complexity and time and effort resources consumed in designing marketing programs can therefore be considerable. In one large CPG firm SBU in our fieldwork, we counted 5 key MSDs in their marketing strategy which required 72 distinct marketing program elements for implementation. However, our fieldwork also suggests that aligning marketing program design with planned strategy content is often not a simple translation from relatively abstract strategic decisions to more concrete and detailed marketing program actions. As there are usually alternative ways of operationalizing MSDs through and across marketing program elements, designing marketing programs requires identifying alternatives and making choices that often involves trade-offs, negotiation, and compromise (e.g., Cespedes 1995; Morgan et al. 2012).

Second, creativity which concerns the degree to which a marketing program design is novel relative to those of rivals in a way that is meaningful for target customers (e.g., Sethi, Smith, and Park 2001; Sterling 2003). While planners may make creative MSDs such as targeting a unique group of customers or identifying a desired positioning for the firm's offering that is distinctively valuable, our fieldwork suggests that most creativity in marketing takes place at the program-level. At this level, creativity is revealed as an important aspect of the process and outcome of marketing program design. This is consistent with the literature indicating that the importance of achieving meaningful differentiation means that translating strategy decisions into

marketing program designs has increasingly been viewed as a creative rather than simply an analytic process (e.g., Andrews and Smith 1996; Slater, Hult, and Olson 2010).

Resource Deployment. Resource deployment concerns the processes by which available tangible and intangible assets are acquired, organized, and mobilized (e.g., Barney 1991; Day 1994). Our fieldwork supports the literature in indicating that aligning the SBU's resource deployments with marketing program designs is an integral element of marketing strategy implementation (e.g., Day and Wensley 1988; Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey 1998). Alignment in the context of resource deployment concerns the degree to which the resources deployed by the SBU match those needed to execute the marketing program activities designed to enact planned MSDs (e.g., Crittenden and Crittenden 2008; Galbraith and Kazanjian 1986). Our fieldwork indicates that since marketing program activities typically cut across many different functional areas, and many different types of resources may be required, the alignment of resources deployed with marketing program design requirements generally involves much more than simply allocating money from the "marketing budget" (e.g., Moorman and Rust 1999).

We found that myriad different actions to acquire, mobilize, and deploy resources in ways that are aligned with marketing program requirements are particularly important with respect to three different types of resources. First, *organizational resources*, including the structure through which tasks are accomplished (e.g., Vorhies and Morgan 2003), the control systems that use information to maintain or alter patterns of activity and behavior (e.g., Jaworski 1988), and the organizational culture that influences the perceptions and behaviors of personnel (e.g., Yarbrough, Morgan, and Vorhies 2011). Second, *financial resources*, concerning the availability and willingness to deploy monetary assets, such as cash reserves and access to capital (e.g., Barney 1991). Third, *human resources*, concerning the number and skills of people

available to the SBU (e.g., Day and Wensley 1988; Morgan 2012). Our fieldwork supports the literature suggesting that aligning these three key types of resources to enable the tasks required by the SBU's marketing program(s) to be accomplished is a critical element of marketing strategy implementation (e.g., Olson, Slater, and Hult 2005; Walker and Ruekert 1987).

Goal Achievement. Our fieldwork suggests that managers view the extent to which intended marketing strategy goals are achieved as fundamental in thinking about marketing strategy implementation. This is consistent with the innovation and technology literature that highlights the impact of an innovation or new technology once in place (e.g., Klein and Sorra 1996; Tyre and Hauptman 1992), and the strategy literature that focuses on the value of strategy outcomes as an important component of implementation (e.g., Miller 1997; Nutt 1996). Our fieldwork indicates that marketing strategy goals usually concern desired levels of performance on two different performance dimensions—effectiveness and efficiency (e.g., Katsikeas et al. 2016; Sashittal and Jassawalla 2001). Marketing strategy effectiveness goals concern short-term intermediate goals such as competitive positioning and customer perceptions (e.g., Varadarajan 1986), and medium and longer-term market-based outcome goals such as sales revenue, market share, and sales growth (e.g., Kerin et al. 1990). Marketing strategy efficiency goals usually concern the level and type of resource utilization in terms such as financial resources consumed relative to budget (e.g., Morgan, Clark, and Gooner 2002). Our fieldwork, with some support from the literature, indicates that the effectiveness (i.e., the extent to which planned objectives are realized) and efficiency (i.e., the resources consumed in achieving realized goals) of goal achievement should be viewed as key elements of marketing strategy implementation.

Cycle-time. The cycle-time of implementation concerns the time between the taking of initial MSDs and the subsequent achievement of realized marketing goals. Both the literature and

our fieldwork suggest that cycle-time is an increasingly important aspect of marketing strategy implementation (e.g., Glazer and Weiss 1993; Krush, Agnihotri, and Trainor 2016). For example, one manager in a telecommunications company indicated: *"Time to market is about the most important thing in implementing our strategy."* The literature suggests that implementation cycle-time may be particularly important when intended marketing strategy aims to achieve first-mover advantage (e.g., Eisenhardt and Tabrizi 1995; Morgan 2012), and in environments characterized by market and technology turbulence (Kessler and Chakrabarti 1996; Moorman and Miner 1998). Our fieldwork suggests that marketing strategy goal decisions may include specific time-frame goals against which subsequent performance is assessed (c.f., Morgan, Clark, and Gooner 2002). However, the literature indicates that in establishing positional advantages, and accelerating cash flows, it is the absolute time taken in achieving realized goals that is of primary importance (e.g., Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey 1998).

4. The Marketing Strategy Implementation Process

Having delineated the core elements of marketing strategy implementation, we now turn our attention to the nature of the marketing strategy implementation process represented in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Our fieldwork reveals marketing strategy implementation to be a complex, iterative process, with movements backwards and forwards within and between the design of marketing programs, deployment of resources, and speed, level, and efficiency of marketing goal accomplishment, as managers strive to align the SBU and its market environment in ways that match the planned strategy. While these iterations primarily involve the elements of marketing strategy implementation described above they often also include re-formulating initial MSDs. We observed numerous examples of MSD changes during the implementation process in terms

of adjusting goals and modifying or even completely changing strategic decisions concerning target market selection, desired positioning, and timing. This supports viewpoints in the marketing literature suggesting that while the formulation and implementation aspects of marketing strategy may be conceptually distinct, they are interdependent—with implementation shaping and constraining marketing strategy content over time (e.g., Cespedes 1991; Moorman and Miner 1998; Morgan 2012).

Our study indicates that in the dynamic process of marketing strategy implementation, MSDs, marketing program design, resource deployment, goal achievement, implementation cycle time, the SBU context, and the market environment change in a mutually adaptive manner. The fieldwork suggests that once initial MSDs are made, these changes may be both sequential and simultaneous. Adaptation often first occurs during the process of developing marketing programs and mobilizing resources to support these, achieving some level of realized alignment between desired strategy and the SBU context. We observed numerous disconnects between initial marketing program designs and subsequent discovery of the realities of resource availability (e.g., budget and hiring freezes) that required changes in marketing program design. This is more problematic than may be initially imagined since a number of managers described subsequent "ripple effects" from having to change one or more marketing program tactical elements due to the absence of required resources. This is aligned with the need for the multiple elements in a marketing program to be internally consistent—and ideally synergistic. Thus, a change in one program element often necessitates adaptation and even wholesale changes in other aspects of the marketing program to maintain internal consistency.

Next, adaptation takes place in aligning resulting realized resource deployments and the marketplace, where further changes to marketing mix design and resource deployment patterns

are made to reflect the reality of marketplace conditions and reactions encountered. Many managers described various ways in which marketing program roll-out and initial marketplace response required adjustments in resources and marketing program design. These ranged widely and included: sales-force reluctance to use a new expert system in front of customers during *LubeCo* market tests; a CPGs discovery that a new piece of point-of-sale material was not a good physical shelf-space and counter fit for one of its key retail channels requiring a complete re-design; and *SoftCo* and *CellCo* both needing to make changes to product designs in response to in-market customer behavior and subsequent feedback. In the *LubeCo* case the salesforce reluctance required a significant change in marketing strategy content MSDs concerning which country marketplaces to target.

Simultaneously, and throughout the implementation process, MSDs may be adapted as previously unobserved constraints, invalid assumptions, unanticipated changes, and unexpected opportunities are uncovered, both within the SBU and in the external market environment. It is intuitive that both marketing strategy decision-makers and marketing program designers while forward-looking are not omniscient either within the confines of the firm or beyond it into the realm of ecosystem and channel partners, customers and prospective customers, rivals, and even regulators and the broader economy. What is less obvious and rarely discussed are the number, nature, and scale of the necessary adaptations that result from this during the implementation of marketing strategy.

5. So, Why Is It So Hard?

Having defined the phenomenon and outlined the process involved in marketing strategy implementation, we next turn to the focal research question directly. In this respect in addition to some of the difficulties outlined above, our research is suggestive of five key reasons that may

help to explain why implementing marketing strategy is such a time consuming, problematic task that frequently results in realized strategy that differs from intended strategy and/or fails to deliver expected outcomes.

Inherent Trade-offs Involved. In making adaptations in the ways detailed above, our research indicates that there are frequent and unavoidable trade-offs. The fieldwork indicates that these trade-offs play an important part in explaining why marketing strategy implementation is such a difficult management task. The trade-offs contributing most to marketing strategy implementation problems are of two types. First, there are trade-offs within individual stages of the implementation process. For example, within the marketing mix design stage of the implementation process, designing marketing programs that are both aligned with planned MSDs and simultaneously creative often requires trade-offs between these two aspects of implementation. This may be inevitable because the constraints imposed by requirements for alignment with intended MSDs reduce the freedom that can enable creativity in marketing mix design (e.g., Amabile et al. 1996). Similarly, within the goal achievement stage of the implementation process both the fieldwork and the literature suggest that trade-offs between goal effectiveness and goal efficiency are inherent in these two aspects of MSD implementation (e.g., Vorhies and Morgan 2003).

Second, there are also trade-offs between different stages of the marketing strategy implementation process. For example, our study suggests that during MSD implementation marketing mix design modifications are often necessary to overcome resource deployment problems encountered, as well as to take advantage of any unexpected market opportunities uncovered. While such program re-designs may lead to a realized marketing strategy that improves goal effectiveness by better aligning the SBU and its market environment, our

fieldwork indicates that the time and other resources consumed in program re-design have a negative impact on both goal efficiency and implementation cycle time. Such trade-offs are also revealed in our fieldwork in the impact of modifications to resource deployments. For example, at *CellCo* following the discovery of unanticipated target customer requirements in initial channel development efforts, the firm had to acquire extra financial resources in order to hire additional specialized sales personnel—significantly lengthening the time to market for launching the new product and decreasing goal efficiency.

Number of inter-unit interactions. Another source of inherent complexity and difficulty revealed in our conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation and the process depicted is the range of different sub-units within the organization involved—many of which are outside of the control of the marketing function, and some of which (e.g., agency partners, packaging and design partners) are often outside the boundaries of the firm. The need to interact with other sub-units and functions within and beyond the SBU may begin in the strategy formulation stage as strategists attempt to figure out "what's possible" in terms of the firm's ability to deliver offerings and programs. The degree to which this occurs informally or formally during strategy decision-making varies. However, once marketing strategy decisions are made, it is largely impossible to avoid interactions with multiple other sub-units as marketing program planners begin to design the specific marketing tactics that will be required to translate the key marketing strategy decisions into a set of well-aligned and internally consistent action steps.

For example, one CPG VP recounted how the first thing her team did when tasked with executing a new marketing strategy in which one of the key MSDs was to launch two new flavored SKUs was to visit with the product development team to get a clear picture of when and what was possible. Indeed, we observed no SBU in our fieldwork that had direct control over all

the elements required in the marketing program needed to translate all of the key MSDs in their planned strategy into a set of realized marketing tactics. Thus, figuring out who has control over what aspects of things necessary to realize a planned marketing program (e.g., budgets, people, tangible components such as products, packaging, etc.) and navigating how to get those with control over these to deploy them in ways that will enable making the desired marketing program real in the marketplace and within available timeframes is a core aspect of the implementation process for most marketers.

Dealing with both internal and external environment. While inter sub-unit interactions depicted above are mainly within the organization, the same logic also extends to an obvious but infrequently considered (at least in academic research) implementation consideration—that implementation decisions and the implementation process itself involve dealing with both internal organizational and external marketplace variables. This includes dealing with channel partners and customers whose perspectives may be formally or informally sought during initial marketing program design. Later, this will also include in-market responses when the initial marketing program is delivered, at which point the responses will also obviously include those of competitors. While marketing strategy and initial marketing program design decisions will include channel, customer, and competitor considerations, it is not until the marketing program is delivered into the marketplace that the expected responses are tested at scale. While dealing with internal variables outside of SBU marketer control is challenging (as detailed in the discussion of sub-unit interactions above), the need to also deal with external marketplace actors, who are not only outside SBU marketer control but also whose predicted and actual responses to marketing program designs and actions often differ—sometimes markedly, adds an additional layer of complexity, uncertainty, and dynamism to implementing planned marketing strategy.

Unknown resource needs and availability. One non-obvious but retrospectively intuitive problem revealed in detailing the implementation process in practice is that strategy decision-makers have an incomplete and imprecise understanding of implementation resource requirements at the time they make MSD choices. For logistical reasons, each marketing strategy decision option cannot have its required implementation tactics planned and detailed to a point that may allow each the individual tactics to be fully costed and its human resource needs (e.g., person hours, competencies required, etc.) calibrated. Rather, our fieldwork suggests that strategy decision-makers "guestimate" at likely budget requirements and generally think about human resources required only in broad terms of "do we think we could we get this done?" However, once MSDs are taken and the implantation planning phase begins, those working on the marketing program design by necessity have to identify and detail the specific tasks required to translate the core MSDs in the marketing strategy into action steps. This provides the first time that a detailed picture of components required for costing and human resource needs identification can be assessed. Even then, there can be later dynamic changes to resource availability (e.g., budget cuts, hiring freezes, etc.) that further complicate and extend the implementation process.

Understanding how this generally works in practice provides additional insight into the feed-forward and feed-back iterative between-stage nature of marketing strategy formulation and implementation depicted in Figure 2. The formulated strategy content feeds-forward into initial marketing program required need identification, which then in turn feeds-forward into resource requirements with feedback concerning the level and types of resources actually available to implementors and in what timeframes. The fieldwork suggests that frequently the resources available do not align with those required to realize the initial marketing program design, which

then requires changes to planned marketing program tactics. In turn, the changes to required implementation tactics may be significant enough that the program is no longer well-aligned with the initial MSDs. In this case, the implementation team may seek permission to adjust or even completely change one or more aspects of the strategy itself or seek senior manager help to change the current set of resources available (e.g., increase budget, expand headcount, hire specialist talent, etc.).

The potential for many "gaps". The number of different steps involved in the Figure 2 representation of implementation and the practical likelihood that in most cases tasks within each stage are given to different individuals and/or teams to complete create a large number of "hand-offs" between people involved in implementing marketing strategy. Our fieldwork suggests that each such hand-off creates opportunities for "gaps" in terms of different understanding or interpretation of requirements and sometimes even in a failure for the intended receiver to actually receive and/or act on what is received. One such hand-off that frequently occurs in implementing marketing strategy is in briefing internal or external agencies (e.g., packaging designers, content teams, advertising agencies, etc.). Although such hand-offs are frequently highly structured with formal briefs and workflows, our fieldwork suggests that the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding is still significant. This is supported by recent IPA survey data in the context of advertising agency briefs which suggests that "*78% of marketers believe their briefs provide clear strategic direction, only 5% of agencies agree*".

To gain additional perspective on this question we worked with one CPG firm in our fieldwork sample to map out major potential "gaps" in the implementation of marketing strategy (operationalized at the brand-level in the firm) and identify factors that may interfere with these hand-offs in ways that may explain observed differences between intended and realized

marketing strategy. We captured this in a visual representation shown in Figure 3. This mapping of the major steps following the formulation of brand strategy to ultimate performance outcomes observed reveals numerous opportunities for things to "go wrong" or at least become less than perfectly aligned. In the particular context of the CPG firm in question we were also able to identify some specific potential causes for such alignment problems occurring in the gaps between steps. Interestingly, the firm's executives found the visual depiction and the questioning process through which it was constructed to be illuminating in thinking about how they could limit the potential for such problems. While Figure 3 is specific to one firm, it is likely that many of the potential ways for Intended vs Realized marketing strategy differences to emerge are likely to also be present in other firms.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

6. Why Common "Fix" Prescriptions May Not Work

Having defined marketing strategy implementation, outlined a conceptual model of the implementation process, and identified specific causes of implementation difficulties inherent in the phenomenon, we now turn our attention to the question of why common "silver bullet" prescriptions for improving marketing strategy implementation may not work. While there have been many "how to get strategy implementation right" type managerial papers published, many of these focus on re-asserting well-known maxims regarding the strategy itself (e.g., making goals specific and means choices clear), how it is "rolled out" (communication clarity, KPI identification), and approaches for ensuring individual and sub-unit understanding and alignment (e.g., Beer and Eisenstat 2000; Vermeulen 2017). As suggested in our introduction, these maxims have been generally well-known for more than 25 years while the incidence of implementation problems appears to be largely unchanged. We therefore focus on more recent

and more specific execution-focused "solutions" identified that may not be as well-known or obvious. These "silver bullet" approaches fall mainly into three areas.

(i) Set goals/directions, plan lightly, and improvise: *"Forget the arduous, intellectualized number crunching and data grinding. In real life, strategy is actually very straightforward. You pick a general direction and implement like hell."* Jack Welch, *Fortune*, April 18, 2005. The basic idea from this solution approach is that many implementation problems arise from "over planning," arguing that since planners cannot be perfectly prescient about the future—particularly in dynamic marketplaces—they will make decisions that even if/when implemented according to "plan" will not create the desired outcomes. This is consistent with some conceptualizations of improvisation in the marketing strategy literature (e.g., Moorman and Miner 1998) and with notions of the desirability of making resource deployments that allow a firm to maintain "flexibility" (e.g., Grewal and Tansuhaj 2001). Advocates of such approaches essentially argue that firms should compete on their ability to "execute" and that this involves being "agile" in responding to marketplace events and reactions to the firm's efforts.

(ii) Place a greater emphasis on marketing execution considerations during strategy formulation option identification and choice selection. Essentially, the argument here is that those involved in developing strategy should spend more time and energy thinking about the executability of available strategy options (e.g., MacLennan and Markides 2021). In some cases, this may include strategy process suggestions to ensure some common membership of strategy and implementation teams to enhance at least some members of the planning team's motivation to stress "executability" since they will be responsible for bring the strategy choices made to life in ways that deliver expected outcomes (Piercy 2016). From a strategy-making process perspective this approach suggests making internal "can do" considerations a key (or at least

more important) part of selecting among more externally focused "should do" strategy options.

(iii) Test marketing of a proposed strategy before executing more broadly. Execution solutions proposed in this vein essentially argue that it is cognitively challenging for strategy decision-makers to identify and anticipate all potential implementation considerations and that these may be better identified by "market testing" the proposed strategy. This is generally viewed as a "live" test and requires turning the proposed strategy into a set of tactics that are deployed into a test market and observing initial marketplace response. This provides an opportunity for both marketing program-building and resourcing considerations to be worked through and channel and customer responses to be observed in ways that may allow modifications to either the content of the strategy or the initial execution approach adopted.

Each of these three "silver bullet" approaches contain logic and arguments that make intuitive sense and at face value seem to offer sensible solutions to commonly observed symptoms of strategy implementation failures. However, the conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation developed in our research offers new insights into why such solutions are unlikely to "solve" implementation problems in practice. For example, in the case of setting only strategy goals and general direction and leaving the rest to be determined by execution teams, who can adapt quickly to marketplace responses, there are very likely to be trade-offs with marketing strategy implementation stages in terms of greater "executability" (e.g., alignment with existing human resources) but reduced creativity in marketing program design as teams are likely to be constrained by what they already know how to do. Our fieldwork certainly produced evidence of this in the reverse case. For example, *LawCo's* decision to target a new consumer segment led the firm to seek new market information and marketing program development approaches from outside consultants to ensure that the firm was able to develop a

marketing program that was aligned with the firm's new marketing strategy thrust. Being forced to focus extended effort on the marketing program development problem, to—by necessity—"think outside the box", and to approach developing a marketing program in a nontraditional way, resulted in a marketing mix design that was seen to be so creative that it was featured on the front cover of the leading professional journal, and even attracted the attention of the national news media (c.f., Sethi, Smith, and Park 2001). Meanwhile strategy implementation trade-offs between stages of the implementation process produced by execution teams being anchored on what they already know how to do and the resources they know are in place are likely to include enhanced human resource alignment reducing implementation cycle-time while reduced creativity may well lower goal achievement outcomes via less differentiated positions.

Solutions anchored on greater implementation focus during strategy formulation are similarly likely to result in better alignment to existing financial, human, and organizational resources. However, the time taken in engaging in additional and more detailed execution consideration analysis during planning while strategic decision options are being explored is will certainly lengthen the total strategy cycle time. In addition, in line with attention-based view theorizing the greater focus on "executability" during strategy making is likely to lead cognitively and attention bounded decision-makers to anchor more on existing resources and constrain consideration of marketplace considerations demanding significant changes in strategy. This is likely to lead to less creative marketing programs with more limited market-focused inputs which may in turn may reduce effectiveness outcomes. For example, *LubeCo's* planning team, which included significant IT and Sales representation, emphasized a very strong implementation focus early in the planning process in developing its new marketing strategy. A senior marketing VP blamed the resulting emphasis on internal political considerations and

failure to comparably consider the nature and extent of the market opportunity for MSDs that failed to achieve desired goals because planners: "*...compromised too far to keep people happy. The technology opportunity we had could have made for a killer value proposition in this market. Instead, we ended up with not much more than a cool sales training tool."* Resources consumed in detailing execution requirements and comparing these to firm capability and capacity for options not selected as well as the strategy selected will also likely reduce efficiency.

Likewise, test marketing of strategy options may lead to faster adaptation of planned strategy as unconsidered and unanticipated resource constraints emerge during test market preparations. It may also enhance alignment with marketplace needs as initial responses are observed and adaptations made. However, trade-offs suggested by our new conceptual model are likely to include longer implementation cycle-time (the time taken for in-market testing to be designed and executed) and increased likelihood of effective competitive response (as rivals are more likely to observe and be forewarned of a firm's intended marketing strategy), which reduce goal achievement. Interestingly, in our fieldwork, *LubeCo* did engage in market-testing its new lubricant recommendation technology, but their fear of making this visible to rivals ahead of launch led them to do so in small international markets that were not representative of most of their business, limiting the value of the tests and the extent to which observed responses resulted in any changes to the planned marketing program. This therefore lengthened the implementation cycle-time while delivering few benefits.

All of this suggests that the common kinds of prescriptions offered for dealing with widely identified symptoms of strategy implementation problems are unlikely to provide "silver bullet" solutions. Rather, our new conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation suggests that it is exceedingly unlikely that any such solutions are possible. In particular, the

very nature of the trade-offs we identify as inherent in the implementation process suggests that all such solutions are likely to help diminish or resolve some aspects of implementation problems but simultaneously worsen others.

7. Discussion

To enhance understanding of why managers continue to experience significant and costly problems in implementing MSDs our study synthesizes fieldwork and literature insights to identify key components of MSD implementation and delineate the process by which MSDs are implemented. Our study reveals important causes for the widely observed difficulties faced by managers in implementing MSDs embedded in the implementation process—that in combination determine the degree to which SBUs successfully realize intended marketing strategy. Chief among these is that the nature of MSD implementation is such that there are often trade-offs inherent between different elements and stages of implementation. Our fieldwork indicates that managers generally find it difficult to discern the nature and extent of these trade-offs ahead of time. Optimizing decision-making is therefore a very difficult managerial task in implementing MSDs. The number and direction of these different trade-offs result in a degree of complexity that can be very difficult to manage effectively in ways that create desired outcomes.

Conversely, our fieldwork also indicates that MSD implementation can constitute an important source of competitive advantage. For example, one manager interviewed suggested: *"The success of a strategy is at least 80% attributable to effective implementation and 20% to the concept,"* and another commented: *"Plans in themselves are worthless, realized strategy is what drives performance".* While resource-based view of the firm has highlighted relationships between firm resources and performance (e.g., Hunt and Morgan 1995; Morgan 2012), our conceptual model suggests that simply possessing superior resource endowments is not a

sufficient condition for competitive advantage. Rather, our fieldwork indicates that it is the ability to realize planned strategy decisions that align available resources with marketplace conditions that determines a firm's ability to outperform its rivals. From this perspective, our conceptual model indicates that implementation capabilities enabling creative and appropriate marketing program design, the deployment of resources in ways that are well aligned with MSDs, and the speedy and efficient achievement of desired marketing goals are among the most important sources of competitive advantage (e.g., Cespedes 1991; Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies 2012). Further, our fieldwork reveals that MSD implementation is often characterized by social complexity, asset interconnectedness, and causal ambiguity, which have been identified as making competitive imitation difficult (e.g., Barney 1991). This indicates that MSD implementation capabilities can be a critical source of sustainable competitive advantage.

7.1 A New Research Agenda

An important reason for undertaking (and sticking with) this research was a desire to stimulate and guide new implementation research by marketing strategy scholars. From this perspective, we believe that our study offers numerous new directions for future empirical work and some indications of research approaches that may be required in undertaking this.

From a substantive research question perspective, our study indicates the need for additional marketing strategy research in numerous areas (see Table 4).

Implementation Sub-processes. While our study clarifies the process by which MSDs are implemented, it also identifies several important sub-processes that contribute to MSD implementation but about which little is known. For example, despite the centrality of the marketing mix paradigm in marketing, we know surprisingly little about marketing program design processes. What are the program design processes that allow managers to develop tactical

marketing programs that are well aligned with planned MSDs? Do these design processes differ from those that allow managers to develop creative marketing mix designs? Further, despite its pivotal role in implementing MSDs, we know very little about the processes by which managers acquire, mobilize, and deploy resources for marketing programs. When and how do managers uncover marketing program resource needs? When and how do they seek to persuade others to deploy resources under their control in ways that match marketing program execution needs? How do managers respond to common deficits in resources needed to design and execute aspects of a marketing program required for strategy execution? Our study indicates that these are fundamental sub-processes in MSD implementation that require significant further research.

Trade-off Conditions and Outcomes in MSD Implementation. An important insight from our study is the existence of trade-offs between both individual components within each of the main stages of MSD implementation and between components of MSD implementation at different stages of the implementation process as important drivers of MSD implementation problems, and subsequent performance outcomes. However, despite their importance, these previously unrecognized trade-offs have been ignored in much of the theorizing and empirical research linking strategy with performance.

This suggests that an important focus for future research should be the identification of conditions under which different marketing strategy making trade-offs enhance financial performance outcomes associated with the strategy. For example, when does it pay to trade-off more radical and innovative MSDs for decreased alignment in marketing mix design and resource deployment? Additionally, when might it make sense for managers to trade-off a stronger implementation focus in marketing planning for less effective goal achievement? Further understanding the conditions under which trading off positive changes on one component

of MSD implementation for negative changes in another is also revealed in our study as a key issue for managers seeking to enhance firm performance. Key questions to be addressed include, when might it make financial sense to trade-off better alignment of resources deployed with marketing mix requirements for longer implementation cycle-time? Similarly, when may financial performance be enhanced by trading off better marketing mix design alignment and/or creativity for less efficient goal achievement?

In examining financial outcomes associated with implementation trade-offs, our research suggests that researchers should pay attention to risk as well as reward outcomes involved. This may be a particularly interesting and important area for research since our fieldwork suggests that marketing strategy implementation failures are commonly associated with strategy content decisions designed to achieve "stretch" goals in tight timeframes. It is commonly the case that managers set such "stretch" goals by senior executives discount (often consciously) execution considerations in their strategy-making in order to be able to create plans that seem to offer a plausible way to deliver against such goals. Such strategy content often requires investments in plans that are less likely to be effectively and efficiently realized and as a consequence increase firm risk. How recognizing and making explicit trade-off choices of the types uncovered in our research affect firm risk outcomes is therefore needed to capture the firm value outcomes associated with marketing strategy implementation.

How Organizational and Marketplace Conditions Affect MSD Implementation. There are likely to be common organizational and marketplace contingencies that may have predictable relationships with aspects of MSD implementation. For example, our fieldwork suggests that resource slack may have important negative and positive relationships with different aspects of marketing strategy implementation. Given the absence of any prior research in marketing, a

number of questions require attention. For example, is there an optimal amount of SBU resource slack under different conditions that is sufficient to facilitate marketing program creativity and allow needed resources to be quickly deployed, but insufficient to relax management controls to the extent that recognition of the need for change is impaired or that resources are wasted? Further, does slack in different types of resources, such as human, financial, and relational have different effects on MSD implementation? Given the drive to remove slack resources during productivity improvement efforts, insights concerning which resources may be safely pared back versus those that are required (and at what levels) to maximize MSD implementation outcomes, is urgently needed. Similarly, the fieldwork provided indications that marketplace dynamism and uncertainty are likely to affect marketing strategy implementation. While these are well-researched phenomena in the realm of strategy formulation and strategy content, they are currently dramatically under-researched in the realm of implementation.

New Challenges in Modern Marketing Organizations. Many of the strategy execution problems identified and the new implementation conceptualization offered in our research are "evergreen" in the sense that while contexts and manifestations may change, the essential nature of the implementation process remains largely unchanged. However, the changes evident in marketing approaches and marketing organization over the past decade suggest new forms of challenges and mechanisms that present exciting opportunities in the marketing strategy implementation research domain. For example, marketing organization concerns how a firm arranges the activities by which required marketing tasks are accomplished and therefore encompasses the mechanisms for implementation (Morgan 2012). With the incorporation of new digital, algorithmic, machine learning, and AI technologies for marketing tasks in areas such as media buying, campaign management, advertising placement, and content creation many

marketing organizations are becoming increasingly specialized in their subunits (e.g., Rodriguez-Vila et al. 2020). This creates important new "within marketing" challenges in designing and delivering integrated marketing programs that are not only aligned with intended marketing strategy content but also do so in ways that are consistent with core and unchanging brand essence. Are such within marketing "alignment across silos" problems different in nature or scale to the cross-functional aspects of implementation that have been examined in past research? Do they require different approaches or mechanisms to achieve alignment and integration? How are such problems impacted by increasingly dynamic changes to "always on" marketing tactics?

Research Design Issues. From a research design perspective our research also offers a number of opportunities and directions for future research. First, our delineation of the components of MSD implementation provides a strong foundation for developing multi-item scale measures that, along with available existing measures (e.g., marketing program creativity), may be used to collect primary data from managers. Alternatively, the depiction of the components of strategy implementation provided may also be useful inputs for text-based measurement approaches. This may be particularly appropriate in single firm studies of multiple SBUs where access to within company documents, emails, presentations, etc. may provide rich proprietary data sources. Second, it is likely that secondary data may also be required to test some of the relationships suggested by our models and address some of the new research questions suggested below. One approach to achieving this may be to adopt single business firms as a sampling frame to enable the use of available secondary sources of data to construct objective indicators of key constructs such as financial performance while avoiding the confounds associated with linking SBU-level phenomenon with corporate-level data.

Third, perhaps the biggest challenge facing all process studies concerns the desirability of

collecting longitudinal data as SBU's move through the process of implementing MSDs. While retrospective accounts from key informants may provide sufficient data to test some of the relationships proposed and research questions posed, fully testing these will likely require data from multiple key informants at different time points as SBUs move from one MSD implementation stage to another. Since collecting such longitudinal data requires significant co-operation from managers, it may be useful to identify a sampling frame via a sponsor organization such as a trade association. Gaining co-operation at the corporate-level to allow access to at least some multiple groups of SBUs with support from corporate-level managers may also be valuable. Multiple in-depth case-study approaches using qualitative and quantitative indicators based on the implementation components and process we provide in our research may also be a viable alternative (e.g., Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry 2006).

Fourth, irrespective of the type or mix of data used marketing strategy implementation as depicted in our research offers a research context that may be tailor-made for multi-level research designs and analysis approaches. Some of the core complexities involved in the process of implementation uncovered here are a result of needing individuals and teams of people to engage in designing and executing numerous different but interrelated tactical marketing actions within coordinated programs and timelines. How individuals involved receive and understand their respective "briefs" and coordinate and integrate the resulting decisions and actions with the rest of their teams and the teams responsible for other aspects of the same marketing program offers a rich area for multi-level study. These may be extended into brand, category, and even corporate levels in multi-brand and multi-category firm contexts.

There are therefore likely to be trade-offs involving accessibility of primary data versus availability of secondary data and numbers of observations versus sampling across many

different firms in constructing a data set to test our model and allied research questions. Nevertheless, while these research challenges may be significant, they must be overcome given the theoretical and managerial importance of the problem our research unpacks. We hope that reviewers will recognize the inevitable trade-offs involved in research designs to address this large and widespread real-world problem area and encourage researchers to engage in efforts to enhance understanding in this critical domain.

[Insert Table 4 here]

7.2 Implications

From a substantive perspective, our study offers important new insights into the marketing strategy implementation phenomena. Marketing strategy implementation emerges in our study as both a multi-faceted phenomenon and a complex, dynamic, and iterative process. Our conceptualization of MSD implementation integrates and extends some existing insights from diverse viewpoints in the literature. In addition, our conceptualization provides new insights into the commonly observed gap between "intended" and "realized" marketing strategies and forms a bridge between the "rational" and "emergent" schools of strategic thought that are often viewed as incommensurate (e.g., Hutt et al. 1988; Mintzberg 1994). Specifically, our fieldwork indicates that most firms act in ways consistent with trying to follow "rational" marketing strategy formulation prescriptions, with the MSD implementation process determining the degree to which the MSDs produced are successfully translated into realized strategy. This suggests that the "rational" and "emergent" schools of strategic thought are not incommensurate, but rather that each represents the extreme end of a continuum, with the MSD implementation process determining where on this continuum any individual marketing strategy episode falls.

Our research also has a number of important new implications for managers. Overall, this

study suggests that managers need to be wary of looking for (or being sold by others) "silver bullet" solutions for common and widespread strategy implementation problems. Our research shows why such solutions are likely to create additional problems in one or more other aspects of implementation even if they reduce problems in some focal aspect. Rather, our research suggests that managers would be better served to:

(1). Recognize that trade-offs are inherent in the implementation process and make explicit and well-communicated decisions with respect to which trade-offs they are most willing to accept as best serving the organization's collective needs. Our focus groups and follow-up discussions indicate that while managers recognize the existence of the trade-offs we identify when they are made explicit, most of them admitted that they had never considered the implications of these trade-offs for improving the implementation of MSDs in their own companies. Our fieldwork discussions indicate that unless managers recognize that these trade-offs exist and begin to factor them into their decision-making, there is little or no possibility that MSD implementation can be systematically improved.

(2). Avoid implicitly assuming that "good" strategy decisions are more likely to be well executed. Our fieldwork suggests a widespread but largely implicit belief among strategists that if they come up with the "right" strategy solution for the external challenges an organization faces in seeking to achieve required goals, that this will be recognized as such and in and of itself will significantly reduce subsequent implementation problems. Our research suggests that above a relatively low threshold there is little recognition of the quality of a strategy among those involved in designing and executing the associated marketing programs. Rather, the nature of the implementation process and its associated problems that we uncover are largely independent of how well designed the strategy content is from an "external fit" perspective.

(3). Consider and try to anticipate the most likely implementation challenges associated with alternative strategy options as part of the strategy-making process. Traditionally, marketing strategy-making has focused on gathering data, applying analytical tools, and selecting decision options on the basis of analyses of external market conditions and trends. Our study suggests that this is necessary but not sufficient. Rather, planners need to realistically assess the degree to which their organization's marketing actions can be configured in new and different ways within relevant timescales to enable them to better evaluate the "implementability" of alternative MSD options. While recognizing that this has time and efficiency downsides, our study suggests the costs of failing to do so can be even more significant and that balancing "can do" as well as "should do" considerations in marketing strategy-making choices is essential.

(4). Invest in building and maintaining the organization's marketing capabilities. While our research indicated that there can be no "silver bullets", the only marketing phenomena for which we have strong empirical evidence linking it with enhanced strategy implementation is a firm's marketing capabilities. Indeed, enhancing strategy implementation has been identified as a primary mechanism linking marketing capabilities with firm performance outcomes (Morgan and Feng 2024). While building such marketing capabilities takes time and is far from costless, any organization seeking to systematically enhance its marketing strategy execution is unlikely to succeed without successfully undertaking such efforts.

Our study also has implications for pedagogy and educators. Most marketing strategy programs in universities (and beyond) focus overwhelmingly on how to formulate marketing strategy content in ways that match customer and broader marketplace conditions. In doing so, they place a heavy emphasis on tools and techniques for identifying and predicting external marketplace conditions (e.g., market segmentation, evaluating segment attractiveness, required

value proposition design, go-to-market option analysis) and predicting likely marketplace responses to strategy options (e.g., competitor response modeling, scenario planning). Our study has two important implications for the current state. First, given the scale and impact of implementation failures we identify, more attention needs to be given to marketing strategy implementation in the marketing strategy curriculum. This is easy to say and hard to do for a number of reasons—not least the relative lack of an established shared knowledge base on which to anchor content for teaching about implementation and absence of pedagogical materials such as frameworks and business cases. However, our focus groups suggest that the new conceptual framework developed in our research itself has pedagogical potential and we have successfully used both Figure 2 and Figure 3 in teaching marketing strategy and brand strategy classes.

Second, when teaching marketing strategy tools, more attention needs to be given to implementation-related internal analysis tools. While far less numerous and common than external analysis tools, these can be identified in areas (at least) such as resource and capability mapping which we show to be an important aspect of marketing strategy implementation in terms of the availability of human, financial, and organizational resources aligned with marketing strategy content decisions. It could also usefully be extended to teaching organizational culture calibration tools (e.g., competing values model, organizational culture inventory). If decision-makers cannot (or do not) identify such available "can do" resources and capabilities during marketing strategy formulation, the likelihood of making strategy choices for which resource alignment is difficult is obviously much higher.

8. Conclusion

Despite marketing strategy implementation's central position in marketing theory explanations of business performance and the frequency with which managers report failures in practice, our

understanding of why implementing marketing strategy is so problematic has been remarkably limited. Through the development of a new conceptualization of marketing strategy implementation, grounded in fieldwork and literature insights, our study identifies inherent trade-offs between different components and stages of marketing strategy implementation as important causes of implementation problems and failures. However, while implementing marketing strategy is difficult, our study indicates that doing so successfully can be linked with SBU performance, and that marketing strategy implementation capabilities may even form a source of sustainable competitive advantage. The challenge is now to determine how best to identify the kinds of implementation capabilities that may best enable them to identify and select among the inherent trade-offs we identify and enable firms to build and leverage such capabilities.

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Table 1: Indicative research on marketing strategy implementation

Study	Research Focus	Conceptualization	Determinant(s)	Outcome(s)	Boundary Mechanism(s)		Key Related Findings	
					Moderator(s)	Mediator(s)	Driver(s)	Outcome(s)
Menon et al. (1999)	Marketing strategy making	Activities, processes, and routines for the design and execution of plans (i.e., situation audit, comprehensiveness, capabilities & assets, integration, comms quality, strategy consensus & resource commitment)	Centralization, formalization, innovative culture	Creativity of strategy, organizational learning, market performance	—	—	• Direct effects (ns/ns/+/ns/ns/ns/+) & (ns/ns/ns/+/+/ns) & (+/+/+/+/+/+/+)	• Direct effects (ns/+/-/+/+/ns/ns) & (+/ns/ns/ns/ns/+/+) & (-/+/+/ns/ns/ns/+)
Noble and Mokwa (1999)	Marketing strategy implementation success	The extent to which an implementation effort is considered successful by the organization	Role performance	—	—	—	• Direct effect (+)	—
Sashittal and Jassawalla (2001)	Marketing implementation processes	A process of organizational improvisation and adaptation resulting from the interaction between emerging environmental forces and emerging managerial choices	—	—	—	—	• Marketing implementation emerges as a firm's adaptive response to day-to-day market events • The nature and extent of implementation-related improvisations appear to directly affect a firm's market orientation, rate of growth, and strategic effectiveness	
White et al. (2003)	Marketing strategy implementation capability	Competence in executing, controlling, and evaluating its marketing strategy	Marketing strategy development styles	Firm performance	—	—	• Direct effect (+)	• Direct effect (+)
Chimhanzi (2004)	Marketing strategy implementation effectiveness	The effective tactical execution of marketing plans, programmes, or strategy	Connectedness, written & interpersonal comms, conflict	—	—	—	• Direct effects (ns/+/ns/-)	—
Thorpe and Morgan (2007)	Marketing strategy implementation success	The process of translating strategic intent into actions and accomplishing objectives	Implementation types (change, collaborative, and cultural)	—	—	—	• Direct effects (+/+/+)	—
Malshe and Sohi (2009)	Marketing strategy making (MSM)	Activities, processes, routines involved in the design and execution of marketing plans	—	—	—	—	• Sales-marketing interface is a three-stage process that consists of Groundwork, Transfer and Follow-up stages	
Slater et al. (2010)	Marketing strategy implementation effectiveness	The effective adoption and enactment of a marketing strategy or marketing initiative	—	Business unit achieving its objectives	Environmental uncertainty	—	—	• Direct effect (+) is moderated (-)
Rosier et al. (2010)	Marketing strategy implementation effectiveness	Not available	Procedural justice	Market performance	—	—	• Direct effect (+)	• Direct effect (+)
Morgan et al. (2012)	Marketing strategy implementation effectiveness (i.e., internal and external implementation effectiveness)	The actions and resources deployed to realize intended export marketing strategy decisions in a firm's pursuit of desired export venture goals	Architectural and specialized marketing capabilities; marketing capabilities integration	Market and financial performance	—	—	• Direct effects (+/+/+) & (ns/ns/+)	• Direct effects (ns/-) and (+/+)
Ahearne et al. (2014)	Middle managers' adaptive implementation behavior (i.e., facilitating adaptability and championing alternatives)	Managers' upward and downward influence to propose, accommodate, and embrace adjustments in planned functional level strategies at the business unit level	—	Business unit performance	Middle managers' informational and reputational social capital; Network size	—	—	• Direct effects (+/+) are moderated (+/ns/+) and (ns/+/-)
Krush et al. (2016)	Marketing strategy implementation speed	The pace of decision-making from formulation to implementation	Marketing dashboard usage	Market performance	Centralization and formalization structure	—	• Direct effect (+) is moderated (-/+)	• Direct effect (+)
Lee and Griffith (2019)	Marketing strategy implementation adaptation/ standardization	The extent to which the MNC adapts or standardizes its overall marketing mix	—	Profit growth	Interaction orientation; competitive intensity; market dynamism	—	—	• Direct effect (ns) is moderated (+/ns/-)
Kalaignanam et al. (2021)	Marketing agility	The extent to which a firm iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market	—	—	—	—	• Ensuring brand consistency, scaling agility across the marketing ecosystem, managing data privacy concerns, pursuing marketing agility as a fad, and hiring marketing leaders are challenges in executing marketing agility • The organizational, team, marketing leadership, and employee levels are drivers of marketing agility	
Malshe et al. (2022)	Marketing strategy implementation	Translating marketing strategy decisions into a set of detailed and integrated tactics and accompanying those with appropriate actions and resource to enact them	—	—	—	—	• Sales and marketing personnel's varying self-interests at different hierarchical levels motivate them to engage in a distinct set of inter- and intra-functional activities that foment implementation impediments	

Note: — = not applicable; + = positive effect; - = negative effect; ns = nonsignificant effect

Table 2: Indicative research on generic strategy implementation

Study	Research Focus	Conceptualization	Determinant(s)	Outcome(s)	Boundary Mechanism(s)		Key Related Findings
					Moderator(s)	Mediator(s)	
Martin Roger (2010)	Strategy execution trap	The belief that strategy execution is distinct from strategy formulation	—	—	—	—	• Making a distinction between formulation and execution is detrimental to a company. The strategy-execution approach sees leaders dictate set strategies and expect employees to execute rules. The choice-cascade model has leaders empower/ support employees to use their judgments
Huy (2011)	Middle managers' influence on strategy implementation	The role of middle managers in influencing the process and outcomes of strategic change	—	—	—	—	• Top executives do not give high priority to the importance of attending to middle managers' emotions in implementing a top-down strategy • Top executives can adjust their strategy implementation actions and improve the odds of success of strategic change if they address the causes of middle managers' group-focus emotions
Cândido and Santos (2015)	Strategy implementation failure	Failure refers to either a new strategy was formulated but not implemented, or it was implemented but with poor results	—	—	—	—	• The true rate of implementation failure is yet to be determined, given that current estimates are based on evidence that is outdated, fragmentary, fragile, or just absent
Sull et al. (2015)	Strategy execution effectiveness	The extent to which a firm successfully executes the formulated strategy	—	—	—	—	• Firms must foster coordination across units and build the agility to adapt to changing market conditions to effectively execute strategies
Lee and Puranam (2016)	Precision of strategy implementation	The extent to which an organization's actions correspond to its strategic intentions	—	—	—	—	• Precision of strategy implementation is desirable when: (a) it is harder for managers to observe their subordinates' actions and communicate the strategy to them and (c) top managers engage in exploratory efforts
Pors (2016)	Interruptions to strategy implementation	Middle managers' active resistance to corporate decisions or difference in sensemaking between top and middle management	—	—	—	—	• By emphasizing ghostly nature of interruptions, this study shows that disruption is not an epiphany where an individual suddenly knows exactly what to do, but an indeterminate, itchy awareness that something more is at stake
Ateş et al. (2020)	Strategy implementation commitment	The willingness to exert effort for executing the strategy	Team members' strategic consensus	—	—	—	• Strategic consensus among team members is positively related to strategy implementation commitment
MacLennan and Markides (2021)	Strategy execution maps	Visual representations of activities and outcomes critical to an organization's strategy implementation and directed means-ends relationships believed to exist between them	—	—	—	—	• The thinking and dialogue casual maps foster enable clearer identification of key activities that manage outcome risk, subunit contributions, and collaborations • More widespread use of causal mapping within the strategy execution field will help to improve clarity around the critical activities that organizations must deliver and thus improve strategy execution
Tawse and Tabesh (2021)	Strategy implementation effectiveness	The extent to which an organization's implemented strategies correspond to its strategic intentions	—	—	—	—	• Managerial structural and interpersonal actions influence the effective implementation of strategy • Competency, commitment, and coordination conditions explain how managerial actions impact strategic implementation effectiveness
Mistry et al. (2023)	Strategy implementation coordination	Activities that turn plans into action assignments and ensure that such assignments are executed in a manner that accomplishes a plan's stated goals	Intensity of TMT joint problem solving	Firm performance	Level of TMT interdependence	—	• The level of intensity of TMT joint problem solving boosts the quality of TMT strategy implementation coordination, which in turn enhance firm performance. TMT interdependence reduces (substitutive effects) TMT joint problem solving's effect on quality of coordination
Schuler et al. (2023)	Top-down strategy implementation	Strategy implementation refers to a set of actions taken by organizational actors that result in the organizational outcomes originally intended by the strategy	—	—	—	—	• Middle managers make sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy when they experience ambiguity about the strategy and its implementation. Middle managers can construct shared and separate realities about a new strategy and its implementation • Middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy may amplify positive or induce negative consequences for strategy implementation in such contexts
Guerra-Lombardi et al. (2024)	Corporate sustainability strategy implementation	Not available	—	—	—	—	• Key drivers for CSS implementation include communication and training, work environment, and corporate commitment and support • Key barriers of CSS implementation include guest behavior and external issues such as the pandemic crisis • Relevance and alignment of key practices vary among departments, which need tailored strategies based on their attributes

Table 3: Indicative research on marketing program element implementation

Study	Research Focus	Conceptualization	Determinant(s)	Outcome(s)	Boundary Mechanism(s)		Key Related Findings	
					Moderator(s)	Mediator(s)	Driver(s)	Outcome(s)
Colgate and Danaher (2000)	Customer relationship strategy implementation	Not available	—	Firm performance	—	—	—	• Direct effect (+)
Rapert et al. (2022)	Vertical communication	Communication between and among top and functional-level management	—	Strategic consensus, marketing and operational performance	—	—	—	• Direct effects (-/-/+)
Dutta et al. (2003)	Pricing process	The process by which firms set or change prices	—	—	—	—	• Pricing resources, routines, and skills help or inhibit a firm in setting the right price—and hence in appropriating value • Strategic decision on pricing capabilities has implications for a fundamental economic action, determining price	
Wallace et al. (2009)	Multichannel strategy implementation success	The effective simultaneous employment of distribution channels (mail order, internet)	Market coverage, channel tracking and reward alignment capabilities	—	—	—	• Direct effects (+/+/+)	—
Sarin et al. (2012)	Strategic change implementation behaviors	Salespeople getting their customers to transact business using the internet rather than through the salespeople themselves	Primary and secondary appraisal	Change implementation outcomes (e.g., sales generated online)	—	—	• Direct effects (+/+)	• Direct effect (+)
Fastoso and Whitelock (2012)	International advertising strategies implementation	The processes that company put in place to implement their international advertising strategies.	Clustering, pattern implementation, localization, national campaign transference	—	—	—	• Direct effects (+/+/+/+)	—
Kiss and Barr (2017)	New product development strategy implementation duration	The number of days taken to implement various NPD process–related actions	—	New venture performance (e.g., sales growth over a period of 3 years)	Industry growth, mental model centralization	—	—	• Direct effect (+) is moderated (-/+)
Töytäri et al. (2017)	Value-based pricing implementation	The development and deployment of a firm resources and capabilities to execute value-based pricing strategy	—	—	—	—	• Firms face eleven barriers to the implementation of the value-based pricing, falling into three distinct groups: individually, organizationally, and externally induced	
Hayati et al. (2018)	Salespeople's strategy role commitment	Employees' determination to effectively perform individual implementation responsibilities	Sales managers' transactional and transformational leadership	Sales group performance in selling new products	Sales managers' degree of centrality	—	• Direct effects (+/+) are moderated (ns/+)	• Direct effect (+)
Tafesse and Wien (2018)	Social media marketing strategy implementation	The process by which firms employ social media strategically by producing content regularly, engaging customers, and generating analytics and customer insights to drive strategic marketing actions	—	Social media performance	—	—	• Direct effect (+)	—
Inyang et al. (2018)	Salesperson implementation of sales strategy	Not available	Sales managers' transactional and transformational leadership	Salesperson performance	Competitive intensity	—	• Direct effects (+/+) are moderated (+/ns)	• Direct effect (+)

Note: — = not applicable; + = positive effect; - = negative effect; ns = nonsignificant effect

Table 4: Current insights, lacunae, and future research agenda emerging from this study

Themes	Insights	Lacuna(e)	Indicative Research Questions	Future Research Directions
Trade-off Conditions and Outcomes in Marketing Strategy Decisions Implementation	• Marketing strategy implementation involves inherent trade-offs within and between different aspects of the implementation process (e.g., resource deployment, marketing mix decisions, implementation cycle-time)	• Lack of knowledge on key trade-offs that are inherent in the marketing strategy implementation process • Scant understanding of problems caused by trade-offs between elements within each stage of the implementation process (e.g., marketing mix design alignment vs. creativity, implementation speed vs. efficiency) • Limited insights on the problems caused by trade-offs between stages of the implementation process (e.g., marketing mix re-design and goal achievement efficiency)	• What are the conditions under which different implementation trade-offs help or hinder performance? • Does it make financial sense to trade-off content with process issues for longer implementation cycle-time? • When might it make financial sense to trade-off effectiveness (i.e., the extent to which planned objectives are realized) with efficiency (i.e., the resources consumed in achieving realized goals)? • When is it smart to trade-off strategy complexity for implementation effectiveness? • When does it make financial sense to trade-off creativity vs. more easily executable strategy content?	• Work that develops insights on the conditions under and by which trading off positive changes on one component of marketing strategy decisions implementation for negative changes in another translates to (un)desirable financial performance • Research that uncovers the short-term and long-term effects of marketing strategy implementation processes. Unveiling such effects require the collection of data from multiple informants at different point in time as marketing strategy implementation moves from one stage to another • Work that empirically test the effects of drivers and conditions that are important in understanding what, how, and when certain tactical and/or process factors help and/or hinder marketing strategy implementation
Implementation Sub-Processes of Marketing Strategy Decisions	• Marketing strategy implementation is an iterative process, with movements backwards and forwards within and between the design of marketing programs; deployment of resources; and speed, level, and efficiency of marketing goal attainment	• No insights on how marketing strategy decisions are enacted via sub-processes that concern tactical actions and resource deployments • Scarce insights on the processes of translating marketing strategy decisions into action-oriented tactics covering relevant aspects of the marketing mix • Little insights on the process by which firm acquire, mobilize, and use resource	• What are the program design processes that allow managers to develop marketing mix that are well aligned with planned marketing strategy decisions? • Do design processes differ from those that allow managers to develop creative marketing mix designs? • How do managers uncover marketing program resources needs? • How can manager persuade others to deploy resources under their control in ways that match marketing program execution needs?	• Work that finds out the iterative processes and actions that can help managers to successful implement marketing strategy • Research that reveals how marketing programs design, deployment of resources, and speed, level, and efficiency of marketing goal accomplishment enact the desired marketing strategy decisions • Research that develops insights on the processes by which managers acquire, mobilize, and deploy (in)tangible resources for executing marketing program activities designed to enact planned marketing strategy decisions
Antecedents of Marketing Strategy Decisions Implementation	• There are factors that help (e.g., leaders' behaviors), curb (e.g., lack of skills needed to enact marketing program), and both help and hinder (e.g., degree of change in marketing strategy content) marketing strategy implementation	• Lack of empirical attention to additional factors that either aid or hinder marketing strategy implementation and thus offer the greatest potential for enhancing understanding of why implementing marketing strategy is so problematic	• How does a higher the degree of change in marketing strategy content affect other individual elements and stages of marketing strategy implementation process? • How do the timing and extent of implementation focus during the planning process affect subsequent marketing strategy decisions implementation process? • How does the availability of slack resources (e.g., time) affect other processes of strategy implementation? • Ho do the individual elements of the marketing strategy implementation process (e.g., resources deployment) impact on financial performance?	• Research that uncovers if the same antecedent factors affect individual elements and stages of the marketing strategy implementation process differently (e.g., alignment of resources deployed vs. length of implementation cycle-time) • Work that unveils if the same antecedent factors affect individual elements within the same marketing strategy implementation stage differently (e.g., the effectiveness vs. the efficiency of goal achievement) • Research that develops novel insights on the linkages between marketing implementation activities and financial performance in terms of cash flows, return on investment, and shareholder value
Moderators of Marketing Strategy Decisions Implementation	• Potential effects of interconnections between antecedents (e.g., degree of change in marketing strategy content, slack of resources) and moderators (e.g., business unit inertia, planning costs, and opportunity costs) variables	• Limited insights on the possibility that existing interconnections between antecedent and moderator factors increase the complexity of managing the process of marketing strategy implementation	• How does inertia moderate the relationship between the predictors (e.g., slack of resources) and different stages of marketing strategy implementation? • How can business inertia be reduced to better facilitate the implementation of marketing strategy decisions? • How does environmental uncertainty moderate the relationship between predictor factors and different stages of marketing strategy implementation? • How do planning costs and opportunity cost moderate the links between different implementation stages (e.g., marketing mix design) and financial performance?	• Research that unveils if factors that help and/or hinder firms efforts to implement marketing strategies are affected differently by common supply- and demand-side moderators • Work that reveals how SBU's should be organized and managed to reduce the negative effects of inertia, while maintaining some of the positive economic effects of inertia • Research that operationalizes, measures, and tests the boundary effects of the moderator variables identified • Work that uncovers additional factors that explain how and when different elements and stages of the marketing strategy implementation process can lead to implementation success

Figure 1
Study Overview

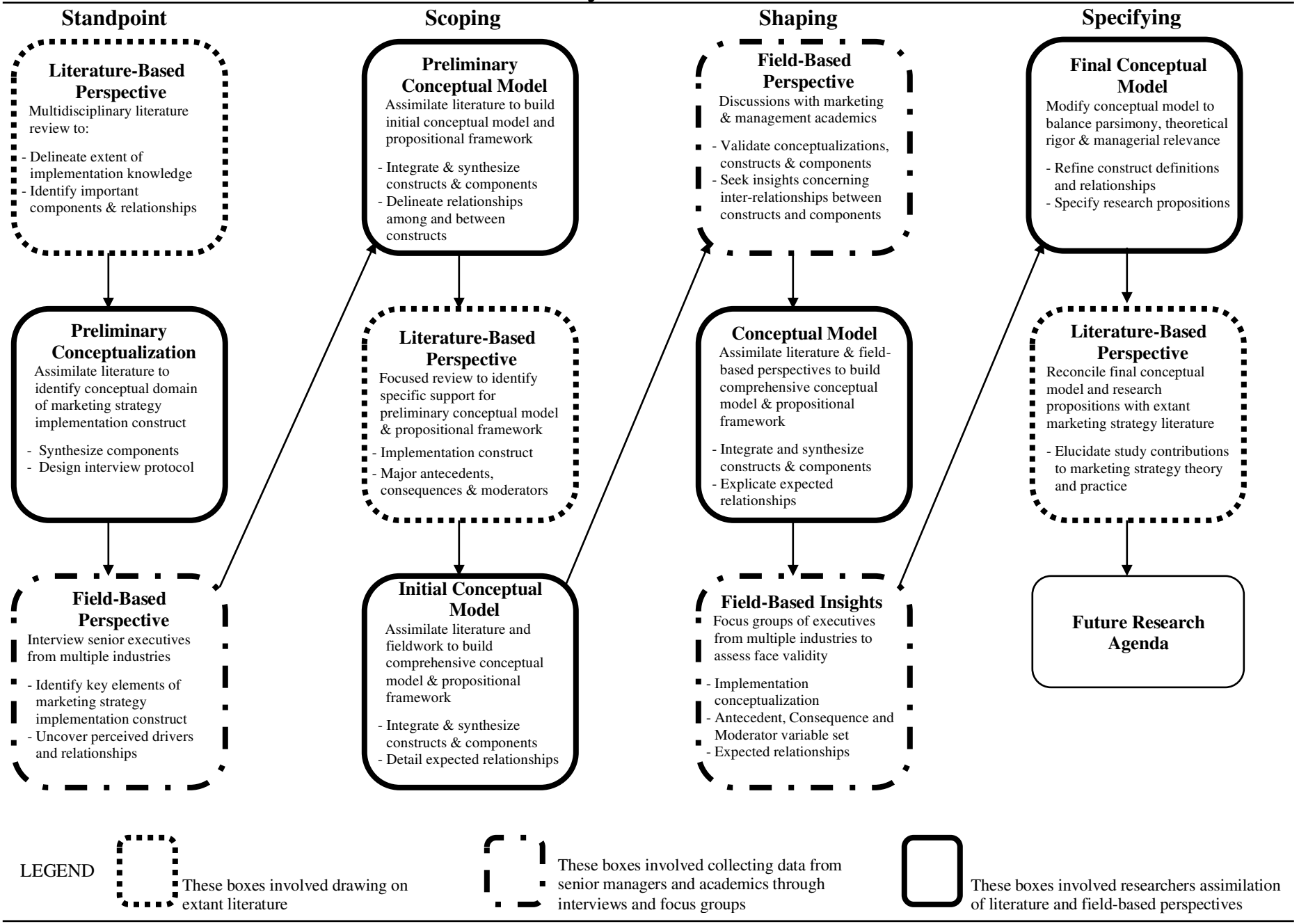


Figure 2
Conceptualizing Marketing Strategy Implementation

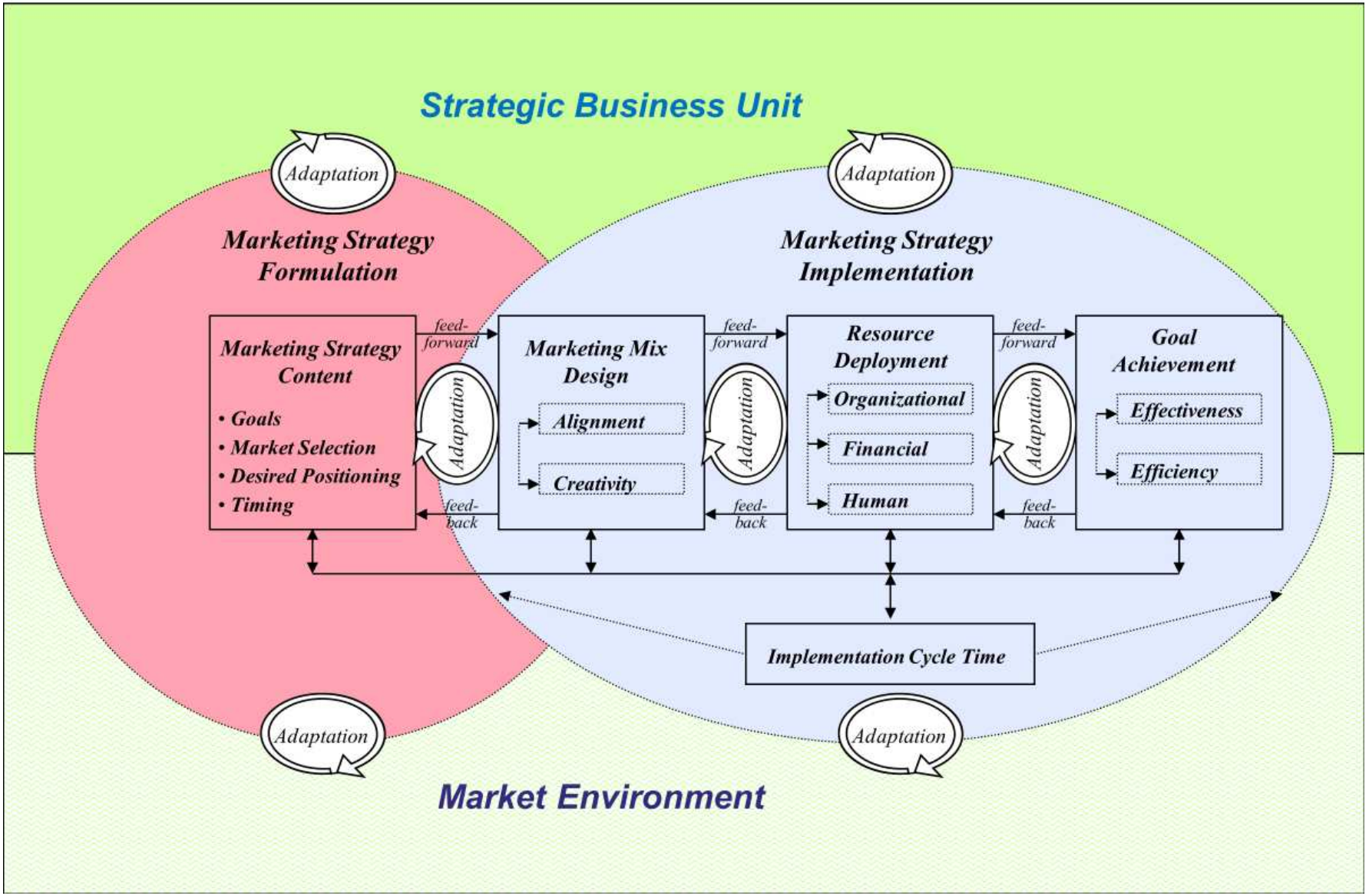


Figure 3
Brand Strategy to Performance Gap Potential

